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Did it really happen? Memory, history and myth in Eugenia Tsoulis'
Between the ceiling and the sky.

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Abstract: World War II, the Nazi occupation and several dictatorships forced many Greek men and women into migration. In 1952 Greece signed an agreement on assisted migration to Australia and more than “250 000 Greek and Cypriot migrants from Greece (1952-74), Rumania (1952-8), Egypt and the Middle East (1952-2) [sic], Cyprus (1974-84) and other politically turbulent countries of Eastern Europe and Latin America” moved to Australia (Tamis, Anastasios M. *The Greeks in Australia*, 2005: 47). The lives of those migrants changed radically as they left home behind. Some of them, or their children, wrote fictional texts explaining some of their experiences. An example of this is Eugenia Tsoulis' *Behind the Ceiling and the Sky* (1998), where the main characters live their lives between present and past and between memories and myths, on the one hand, and facts and the lifeworld that surround them, on the other. This paper will analyse this novel and the sometimes blurred boundaries between memory, history and myth.

Keywords: Greek migration, memory, family secrets.

This paper aims at explaining the sometimes blurred boundaries between memory, history and myth using as an example a novel written by a “hyphenated” Australian, a woman whose identity is prejudged and considered blurred, from the fringe or in need of an explanation as her name is not “typical aussie”: Eugenia Tsoulis.

She is the Executive director of the Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia and one of her goals is to “promote the cultural expression of all new groups of migrants” (Tsoulis 2006). Eugenia was a migrant herself, as she moved to Australia with her family in the 1950s. She decided to study visual arts and her ability is proved in her love for the Arts in general: she is also “a printmaker whose work is held at the Art Gallery of South Australia” (Mickan et al. 2002), *Between the Ceiling and the Sky* is her first novel, published in 1998 and again in 2000, and she has also written short-stories, such as “A Place called Melitsa” in Helen Nickas' *Mothers from the Edge. An Anthology* (2006). Generally speaking, it can be said that her work deals with “forced migration and dislocation, crossing cultural boundaries and time” (Nickas 2006: 263) and she understands “the need for artistic expression, whether it be through the written word, through painting, music, song, role play or dance (,) inherent in all of us”(Tsoulis 2006).

If I had to name two keywords to designate *Between the Ceiling and the Sky*, I would use memory and family secrets, as these words can be linked to myth and history, to present and past, to the lifeworld and the feelings. All these dichotomies are a significant part of this evocative and sensual novel: “evocative” because it remembers the past and “sensual” because it reminisces about feelings and places and the memories, traumas and experiences are very vivid. The author gets the reader to feel empathy with all the characters, even with those who caused suffering to others. Let me explain the plot of the novel:

Diana is a second-generation Greek-Australian social worker who is doing a project on the former inmates in a mental hospital. In order to accomplish it, she has to read all the patients' files, analyse them, make comparisons and write a final report. This project will make her come to terms with her childhood, her family and her origins. She is the main narrator.

The main character in *Between the Ceiling and the Sky* is Antigone, a Greek woman. The novel goes back and forth different moments in her life and the reader gets to know some of her experiences and traumas through (1) her thoughts and (2) through other characters. In fact, memory is the main realm of this novel as the reader only listens to Antigone's voice five times in the 300 pages of the novel: twice she is in Australia and three times in Greece¹. Some of the information the reader learns about Antigone deals with some incidents during the Nazi Occupation (1941-44) and during the Greek Civil War (1946-49), the death of her lover, an imposed abortion, the acceptance of an arranged marriage in Australia, the 36-day voyage to the new country, her arrival, the life in her new house, the arrangements before the wedding, the night after the wedding, the delivery of her daughter, her picture at the baby's christening, her nervous breakdown, her stay in the mental hospital for seven years, how she is able to leave the hospital, and her life in Greece when she is an old lady.

This data is linear and follows a chronological order. However, the structure of the novel is very different: *Between the Ceiling and the Sky* is a collage of information and characters, which demands an active attitude from the reader in order to decipher the information suggested. This writing technique maintains the blurred boundaries between memory and history and, by writing back-stories, the author provides a polyhedral perspective on the life of the main characters: Antigone and Diana. Other men and women interact in their lives and the main ones are Petro (Antigone's husband and Diana's father), Vangelia (Antigone's best friend and Diana's godmother), Stathi (Vangelia's husband, Antigone's best man and Diana's godfather) and Sia (a girl Antigone shared cabin with in her voyage to Australia). There are more than thirty characters in the novel but these are the main six. The novel is also kaleidoscopic in the sense that all these six characters have a connection with Antigone and Diana, and each decision taken by each one of them affects the lives of the others in a very dramatic way: the consequences of their acts are so powerful that they become turning points in Antigone and Diana's lives.

¹ Antigone's voice is heard in the following moments: in Australia, (1) to her future husband the first night she arrived (p. 87); (2) to thank Vangelia for her help the first day she is in Australia (p.93); in Greece, she is older, (1) to thank Toula, the girl who helps her (p.11), (2) to talk to her sister and laugh about their ages (p. 95) and (3) to joke about her fate with her friend, best man and Vangelia's husband, Stathi (p.96)

A very meaningful characteristic of the novel is that it does not provide dates and names of places, and, in fact, the reader can only deduce the decades of the setting of the novel with historical data and logic: if the Nazi occupation of Greece was between 1941 and 1944, the Greek civil war lasted from 1946 to 1949, the migration agreement between Greece and Australia was signed in 1952, Vangelia and Stathi had been in Australia for more than 2 years when Antigone arrived and Antigone had lived the war, this means that they arrived in Australia in the late 1950s. Antigone was 25 when she married Petro and had the baby a year after her arrival, she spent seven years in the mental hospital, then, she was 33 when she left it. Moreover, Vangelia died after ten years in Australia, after that Stathi moved back to Greece and Diana was a 6 or 7 year-old child when aunt Vangelia died, therefore, it was in the early-mid 1960s. Diana is 40 when her father dies and almost 50 when she goes to Greece and meets Stathi again, so the novel is set in the 1980s-90s. This lack of dates gives a sense of immateriality, of uncertainty and, to a certain extent, of mythology, as the novel could be explained as a myth or a legend, for example, "Once upon a time a beautiful lady was forced to leave her beloved and courageous mum and her idyllic village by her terrible brother-in-law. As all the women in her family, she was brave and determined and she crossed the oceans in order to accept her fate and start a new life in a far, far away country. However, her past haunted her. What terrible secret did she hide? What terrible sin had she committed?"

This could be a chivalrous tale where Antigone would have to suffer countless pains and go through a hazardous penance before being able to go back to her homeland. However, *Between the Ceiling and the Sky* is not a chivalrous tale, it is a 21st century novel that tries to bring to light the hardships of war, forced migration, dislocation and the difficulties in crossing boundaries, especially those of time and of culture.

Another significant aspect of this novel is the naming of the characters. Names have a meaning and most Greeks know them, especially if they bear mythological references. The name "Antigone" refers to the myth of Oedipus. In Sophocles' version, Oedipus and his mother, Jocasta, had two sons and two daughters. When Oedipus had blinded himself as punishment and left into exile, his two daughters, Antigone and Ismene, helped him as guides. The two sons fought for the kingdom and both died. Their uncle, Creon, became the new king and he forbade the burial of the one he considered the aggressor. Antigone refused to accept his orders and buried her brother. When Creon found out, he ordered her to be walled up alive, however, she hanged herself and, Creon's son, who was in love with her, stabbed himself next to her body. Therefore, the name "Antigone" represents a stubborn and determined woman who will go against anyone's will to follow her moral. This is a characteristic of the main character in *Between the Ceiling and the Sky* as she defies the roles imposed on her as a virgin daughter, wife and patient in order to follow her feelings, thoughts and moral.

"Diana" is the Roman equivalent of the Greek goddess Artemis, the goddess of woodland, nature and protector of women, who was also invoked for aid in conception and childbirth. On the one hand, these characteristics are true for the main narrator in the novel as her birth unleashes the dreams, fears and traumas of many inhabitants of the household. Moreover, she rescues Antigone's story and gives voice to her and to the other inmates of the mental hospital. Furthermore, she becomes the bridge between two

cultures and two ways of living. On the other hand, Diana's naming is special because she was christened with Petro's mother's name:

he [Petro] had held her steady in his hands, trying to find traces of him in her face; if not him, perhaps his father or his mother. No matter she bore no resemblance, and had a face so like her mother's –she would have his mother's name. She had his grip and look of determination besides. (Tsoulis 1998: 109)

However her grade six teacher, Miss Dalesworth, "told her she would call her Diana, much better than that long name that no one could pronounce. It would take up less space in her exercise book; and besides, it was the closest translation she could find" (139). Miss Dalesworth was her favourite teacher and she accepted her new name with pride and taught the correct pronunciation to all the members in the house.

Other meaningful names are Petro, which means "stone"; Vangelia, which comes from Evangelia and means "one who brings good news", Stathi the shortened version of Efstathios and means "well built, stable" and Sia comes from Theodosia and means "God-given". All of them bear witness to their names.

Not only the structure of the novel and the names of the characters have a special meaning in *Between the Ceiling and the Sky*, but also the presentation of the different settings, moments in time and characters. These are not described in relation to others but through scattered information that the reader has to collect and deduce.

Many people live in that household: Antigone is very secretive and does not share her fears nor her traumas with anyone; Petro is in love with her, thinks she is a queen and that only he can obtain her; Vangelia is very generous, helps Antigone as much as she can and tries to make her feel at home; Stathi –Vangelia's husband- and Antigone get on very well and he will be Antigone's best man; another couple, Nikko and Elli, also live in the house, Elli and Antigone spend most of the days at home as Elli has a baby and Antigone is pregnant and they get on well, however, Nikko and Elli have problems because he is tired when he gets home, the baby does not stop crying and Elli does not pay him the attention he wants. The problems are shared in the house, for example: one night Nikko and Elli are in their bedroom, the baby doesn't stop crying. Nikko wants to have sex with Elli but she doesn't want so he tries to force her/ rape her, she screams, there's a huge argument and everyone in the household enters the room to help her. He decides she has put shame on him and, soon after that, they leave to another city. Antigone feels very lonely, takes care of the house mechanically, and hardly talks as she lives in the past and has no one to talk to or to take care of.

Vangelia is sick and, keeping it secret from everybody else in the house, she goes to the doctor, who says she just needs to rest and eat well. The following information the reader gets about her is that she has spent three months in hospital with blood transfusions. Whilst in hospital, Antigone delivers the baby, has a nervous breakdown and is taken to a mental hospital. In order to explain her Antigone's lack of visits, Vangelia is told that Antigone eloped leaving her baby behind and she insists Petro on going after her, listening to her and solving their differences together. When she goes back home, she finds the clothes of another woman. Petro decides Vangelia has to know

what happened and the new woman tells Vangelia Petro's point of view. Petro and Stathi make her promise she won't visit Antigone in the mental hospital because that will deeply upset her and her health is too weak. The clothes in the house belong to Anna, a Greek neighbour who will marry Petro when he gets his marriage annulled and who takes care of Diana as if she were her own mother.

The facts are that Antigone was going through the traumas of the war and the death of her lover, she had remembered the forced abortion while she was in hospital delivering the baby; and, once at home, she had not found Vangelia, Elli was not there and everyone was quite secretive; moreover, the baby did not want her milk and she thought she was a bad mother; finally, she did not want to be touched by Petro. One night he wanted to take her, but she did not want him, he insisted, she had the visions of the war again and she spat at him, he slapped her mouth and tried again, she resisted and screamed, he threatened to kill her if she went near the baby again and told her she should go if that was how much he repulsed her. She left screaming for the baby. Petro couldn't understand her behaviour, he guessed she would be in Elli's old room crying and that she would come back, but she did not. When she left, she left the house, it was raining heavily, she was barefoot and she sang loudly for

her baby, for herself, for the soldiers who had killed, for the men who had fought and lost, for the women who had mourned, for her husband who had wanted her, for Vangelia in hospital, for Elli who was far away, for the orange petals that were crushed under her body in that orchard, for the stars that didn't shine here, for the horizon all distorted where no sea ever met the sky. (161)

Two policemen took her to the mental hospital. She mistook them for gunmen and she resisted as much as she could. As she did not speak English and did not want to help the enemy find her daughter, the police took a week to inform Petro about Antigone's whereabouts. When Petro entered the hospital, he decided he had to take her out of there but then

He had stood there for a long time, calling this *emaciated frame* by his wife's name, asking *it* to come back to their child. But all *it* did was to crawl even further back into the wall, singing louder, shaking *its* head from side to side. He didn't know *it*, *it* didn't know him, didn't know *itself*, didn't know where *it* was! His wife no longer lived in that body, she had gone! (210-211)
(my italics)

He visited her a few more times but then he determined he had to be practical: he talked to the priest and solved the matter because the baby needed a mother and he needed a wife. During those months, Antigone lived her traumas² again, helped by the

² Some of these traumas are seeing the public execution of the men in her village, her father included; the strength of the Barbatis' women (the women in her family) who horse-rode in the night in order to take food and clothes to the young men who hid in the mountains; or how she fell in love with a young man from her village, how they both risked their lives to meet, how they made love on a bed of orange petals, how one night she went to take him food and found him and three other young men killed, how she held him, tried to warm him and sang and talked to him until their mothers found them; how she screamed in silence during his funeral; how her mother forced her to go to Athens and have an abortion in order to give her and Antigone's sister some chance of a "normal" life in the future (that is, get married and have a

electroshock therapy which left her numb, and came to terms with her past. Once she learned to live with her past experiences, she came up with a routine which helped her keep her sanity during the seven years she stayed in the mental hospital: in the morning she took a shower before all the other inmates and only then she sang and spoke, she also thought about her daughter and came to terms with her life and her fate; when she exited the shower, she stopped speaking, tried to become invisible and let the days go by.

The myth of “the mad woman” has been studied in literature, especially in the late 19th and 20th c (Perkins Gubar 1899, 1913; Gilbert & Gubar 1979; Kristeva 1986; Pearce & Mills 1989). Regarding *Between the Ceiling and the Sky*, Antigone wanted to have her lover’s child and live her life as a widow, she wanted to keep something of him to remember he had loved her, that she had been loved, but that was not possible. Her life stopped being hers when others took control and decided her fate. Being with Petro was not significant, she would not have loved any other man, but the fact that Vangelia was not in the house and she could not talk to her and take care of her, the fact that both women were told false stories instead of the truth because the men around them thought they would not be able to cope with the news, these facts did mark their lives. How would Antigone’s life have changed if she had been allowed to visit Vangelia in hospital and then nurse her at home? How would Vangelia’s life have changed if she had been told the truth and have received some support to visit Antigone in the mental hospital? Or if Stathi had visited Antigone? How would Antigone and Vangelia’s lives have been if Elli’s husband had not tried to rape her or had not decided to move away to another city? The Greek women in this novel who lived in the 1950s-60s were not allowed to have a life of their own and this is a very significant difference with Diana’s life.

Diana was raised in the household by Anna, Petro, Vangelia, Stathi and Vicky; her best friend until grade six was Jeanette, it was then when she realised that they came from different worlds and that Jeanette would not understand hers; that year, she met Dimitra, a new-comer to the neighbourhood, who became her best friend. Diana studied a degree, lived with a non-Greek man and had children who were not baptised. Petro never visited Diana’s apartment, not because he was disappointed at her as she thinks, but because he felt lost: he was caught between his memories of Greece and the reality of the country when he visited it and, in Australia, he was in a country he couldn’t understand. At a certain point, Petro stopped belonging to the present and found his homeland in his memories.

As we can see, Diana and Petro’s relation was not very close and it did not get closer when Anna died. Moreover, Diana had created a myth around a picture where she could see a woman with sad eyes who held her when she was a child. She was never told Antigone’s story and, although she had wanted to ask questions, she had not found the convenient time. At Petro’s funeral, she met Sia, who told her she had known her mother and had Stathi’s contact details in case she wanted to solve her doubts. Diana was puzzled but thanked her. Sia did not explain Antigone’s story or how she had

father for their kids instead of the family honour being broken); later on, how her sister’s husband, Thanasi, found her a suitable husband in Australia, how her uncle did not agree but accepted her leaving to Australia; how the voyage was similar to a rite of passage but her conclusion was that she was repulsed by the life she was about to start.

helped her leave the hospital, live in Australia for some years and then go to Greece. Diana finished her report on the inmates in the mental hospital, learnt the situation of the woman who had held her when she was a child and realised not only that she was her biological mother but also that everyone in the house had kept that secret from her, that all of them had lied to her. Ten years after Petro's death, she travelled to Greece, met Stathi and was given a shoe-box with the books Antigone had written whilst in the mental hospital where she explained who she was, what had happened and how she felt.

To conclude, *Between the Ceiling and the Sky* is a polyhedral novel where memories, histories and myths are used to explain the feelings of forced migration, dislocation, cultural boundaries and time boundaries but also traumas and family secrets. Most of the characters in the novel wonder whether certain facts really happened as reality is hard to believe, and, when found out, their past is shaken and questioned.

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